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IS WOMAN SUFFRAGE IMPORTANT?

BY MAX EASTMAN

THEODORE ROOSEVELT, in a cautious reference to the movement for equal suffrage, recently delivered this opinion:

"We hear much about women's rights. Well, as to that, decent men should be thinking about women's rights all the time, and while the men are doing that—the women should be attending to their duties."*

As evading a political issue with a moral platitude, we might pass that statement by, were it not for what it reveals by implication. It reveals that Mr. Roosevelt, with probably most of the men of his profession, still regards the equal-suffrage movement as a clamor for rights. I believe that not one-fiftieth of the women engaged in that movement are actuated by a desire to get rights. Probably none of the men so engaged are actuated by a desire to give them rights. It may appear true to these men that if any adult woman, with the established qualifications, desires to vote, it is not their business why she desires to vote, it is unjust to deny her the opportunity. They may believe that as an ambitious republic we can ill afford, either for what we call practical reasons or for reasons of romantic sentiment, to deny a direct justice to a number of hundred thousand people who vehemently ask for it. They may be unable—even as politicians—to refrain from thinking about women's rights. But such thoughts are not the heart of their enthusiasm. The heart of their enthusiasm is not an acknowledgment that equal suffrage is abstractly right or just, but a conviction that it is important. In my opinion, it has an importance too far-reaching for the grasp of persons immersed in politics or business, and I shall try to set forth, in a brevity suitable to their leisure rather than to the subject, the nature of that importance. In so doing I can present no new

* From a speech at Poughkeepsie, September 30th, 1910, reported in the New York "World."

“arguments,” for there are none, but I will try to show that among the old, two at least have at the present day a vital thrust in them.

To clear the field for those two, let me say, then, at the start that we do not look to women’s votes for the purification and moral elevation of the body politic. That is a lovely hope, transmitted to us in its classic form, I believe, by George William Curtis. “I am asked,” he exclaims, “would you drag women down into the mire of politics? No, sir, I would have them lift us out of it.”

But we are not much stirred by the hope of such miracles in this day. We are more scientific than to judge women in general by the one we have in our romantic eye. We look round in the city and the country, and we see who the men are and who the women are; and we conclude that neither sex has exclusive hold of the reins, or spurs, of morality.

Indeed, it has been maintained in New York City, by persons with an eye to the private profits of politics, that woman suffrage would be a help to them in their business. Nor is it possible to deny—speaking from that city only—that this sudden extension of the franchise might furnish to the powers of corruption a temporary help. That is because, after the vote is granted to them, some time will elapse before a normal proportion of women acquire the habit of voting, a natural inertia will have to be overcome, and the powers of corruption have a better perfected system for overcoming the inertia of voters than the powers of reform. “The children of darkness are wiser in their generation than the children of light.” That is why nobody ever quite succeeds in the salvation of society.

That state of affairs, however, besides being local, will be temporary. Nothing will call out the votes of the better class of wives and mothers quicker than a striking ascendancy of the corrupt powers. And when an equal proportion of all classes of the women’s votes is called out, our educated and our American-born vote will be increased, and our uneducated and foreign-born vote decreased, in the final proportion.* Therefore, while we cannot look to women’s votes for such an inundation of purity as certain chivalric

* In the year 1908-09 there were enrolled in the public high schools of the United States 475,761 girls and only 365,512 boys. And of the total number of immigrants to this country in the fiscal year 1909, 519,969 were males and only 231,817 females.

souls would love to think, we can assure ourselves of no deterioration, but on the contrary an increase through them of the average intellectual culture and acquaintance with American institutions in the electorate.

Moreover, we cannot ignore the fact that women, even when their opportunity and the demands we make of them are as great as they should be, will remain in certain ways normally different from men. Women are mothers, and men are not. When all psychic marvels and parlor nonsense are laid aside, that is the scientist's difference between men and women. Women inherit, with instinctive motherhood, a body of passionate interests that men only partially share. And when we say that those interests are needed in government, we but extend to the State as a whole a generalization already applied to every essential part of it. For we freely acknowledge, in the daily progress of our lives, that women's vital intuitive judgments tend often to recall us from our theoretical and commercial vagaries to the chief issue, the conservation of human resources. An extension of that tendency into the sphere of politics will appear less incongruous and more advisable with every year that the profession of politics continues to improve as it is now improving.

Governments are more and more approaching the real concerns of humanity. All those moral and social problems, the preservation of health and safety, the regulation of hours and conditions of labor, the guidance of competition, even the determination of wages and the cure of poverty—problems that used to be handled by a few supernormal individuals under the name of "charity"—are now creeping into the daily business of bureaus and legislatures. This civilizing of governments is a process which we must further with all our might, that ultimately even the greatest questions of democratic equality, which are still only agitated by a handful of noteworthy idealists, may become the substance of party platforms and the fighting-ground of practical politics.

Socialism in this country is a protest against the irrelevance of politics. That is what much of it is. The growth of the Socialist vote means that enthusiastic people believe that the best intellects of the nation ought to be concentrated in legislative debate upon the problem of securing to all its citizens an opportunity for economic well-being. Yet

there are many besides Socialists who urge and expect this change in the centre of governmental interest. Many besides Socialists are ready to do all in their power to focus political attention upon the true issues of advancing civilization. And, while we have not enough experimental evidence for a conclusion, we have the opinions of hundreds of good men in those States and nations where women vote, to support our reasonable expectation that their influence will favor this achievement.

Another hope we may cherish of the political effect, not of women's votes, but of the fact that they vote. The sexes are more idealistic in what they do together than in what they do apart. For this reason the coming of women—or the coming, let us say, of families—into politics, will perhaps bring a certain benefit other than what you might estimate by counting the wise or virtuous women's votes. It will make impossible, for instance, that state of conscience prevalent among male politicians, who go into the service of the State with the happy feeling that they have left their virtues at home in the safe-keeping of their wives and daughters. Men throw the innocence of their women folk as a sop to God, and go about the devil's business. But it may be doubted whether God or any one else was ever satisfied with innocence as a substitute for virtue active in the world. I could never see the value of preserved innocence. It is perfectly possible that our republic will be damned to moral destruction, men and women together, and it is possible that it will be saved to great usefulness, but certainly if it is saved it will be saved not because of the number of cloistered innocents it contains within its boundaries, but because of the number of effective human beings who save it. Any measure, therefore, will do well, which tends to reduce the number of those males who think that an ineffectual wife can do the being good for the whole family.

Especially it will do well if it reduces the number of such men in public affairs, where the lack of those high standards that we set for ourselves in our homes is lamentably apparent. "He is such a good man in his family!" we say of our disgraced representative. Perhaps if we do not waste our time trying to make him good outside his family, but allow his family and its acquaintance with him to extend into the sphere of his political activity, he will be good there too, or else nowhere, and there will be no doubt about it. He

will at least realize the importance of honor in public service, and no longer be able to return home and think he is better than his acts.

Such probabilities, however, with so brief experiments to test them, do not give political equality a pressing importance to the man of average interest in experimental progress. In considering the effect of women's votes upon politics, as in mentioning the question of abstract rights, I have but endeavored to clear the way for the arguments that strike us vitally. It should give us a certain hospitality toward those arguments to know that they are reinforced by the ancient ideals of being fair and minding our own business. And it should comfort our timidity to reflect that women's votes will not do harm to the body politic; they will increase the proportion of educated and American voters, they will somewhat encourage the tendency of our legislatures to direct their debates to the deep problems of developing life, and perhaps they will make political honor a little more compelling by bringing the business of politics nearer to the home. These considerations may assuage the shock that the idea of women's voting conveys to our romantic sentiments and prepare us to accept, if it can be proven, the vital importance of equal suffrage to the life of the people and the advance of civilization.

It is not justice as a theoretical ideal, nor feminine virtue as a cure for politics, but democratic government as the practical method of human happiness that compels our minds. The Anglo-Saxon race has progressed so far as it has, in intellectual and moral and material culture, largely because it has carried forth the great venture of popular government. We have learned to take it for granted, and so to forget, that civil liberty is the foundation of our good fortune, but we ought to remind ourselves of it every morning. We ought to remind ourselves that we are the van of a great exploit. Had we been alive when the daring plans were laid, we should remember. The greatest hypothesis in the history of moral and political science was set up in this laboratory, and our business is to try out the experiment until the last breath of hope is gone out of us.

The democratic hypothesis is that a State is good, not when it conforms to some general eternal ideal of what a State ought to be or do, as the Greeks thought, but when it conforms to the interests of particular concrete individuals—

namely, its citizens, all that are in mental and moral health; and that the way to find out their interests is not to sit on a throne or a bench and think about it, but go and ask them. Now to discriminate against an approximate half of the citizens—just because they have, as we say, such *different interests* from the rest—is to betray our hypothesis and destroy our experiment at its crucial point. For the whole point of it was that we would give up asking an expert political class of the people what the State *ought* to do, and go down and ask all the people, expert or not and political or not, what they are *interested* in having it do.

Not only have the thinkers of the world waked up to the fact that women are individuals and so to be counted under this theory of government, but the world itself has so changed that the practical necessity of applying the theory to them drives itself home. We need but open our minds to the facts. With the advance of industrial art the work of women has gone from the house to the factory and market. Women have followed it there, and there they must do it until this civilization perishes. In 1900, approximately one woman in every five in the United States was engaged in gainful employment, and the number was increasing. Most of these women have no choice as to whether they will work or not, and many of them are working in circumstances corruptive of health and motherhood. It is, therefore, a problem vital to the future of the race how to render the conditions of industry compatible with the physical and moral health of women. And to him who knows human nature and the deep wisdom of representative government, it is clear that the only first step in solution of that problem is to give to the women themselves the dignity and defence of political recognition.

Compared to the variety of their needs, and the subtlety of the disadvantages under which they enter a competitive system, it is a small thing to give them. But it is the first and manifest thing. It is the ancient antidote of that prejudice which everywhere opposes them, and its smallness not a reason for withholding, but for bestowing it. Give them that small thing for which Anglo-Saxon men have grovelled, and lied, and slaughtered, and perished, for a thousand years to win—namely, a little bit of the personal sacredness of sovereigns before their rulers and the law. A small thing, but their own, and an indispensable prerequisite and guar-

antee of every other privilege or opportunity you may hope to confer upon them.

Women have that guarantee in a male democracy, it is stated, through their husbands and fathers who represent them. And to an extent the statement is true. To an extent it is true, even when the husbands and fathers have none of that perfect loyalty which the statement assumes, for the habit of mind which democracy engenders in the governors involuntarily extends to their dealing with the unenfranchised.

But there is a time when it is not true, and a point where that habit of mind does not extend. And it is a crucial point for them—when as a class they, the unenfranchised workers, segregate themselves and dare to stand together for their special aims in a labor organization. Then they are severed in our mind, as they are in fact, from any voter who might represent them; and then, above all, they need the standing of units in a political system. For there are but two at all dependable guarantees of the effectiveness of an organization of people without wealth: one is gunpowder and the other is the ballot.

“Why, the ballot never helped the working-classes!” we hear it exclaimed. “*Organization* is their only hope!” But such ignorance of the history and significance of popular sovereignty is manifest in this exclamation, that one knows not with what kindergarten instruction to begin to answer it. He has read nothing or he has read in vain of nineteenth-century democracy who thinks that labor organizations of males could have arrived where they are, in the respect of men and the law, if they had been unable to compel consideration from the State. It is *because* organization is the sole hope of labor that labor must have its portion of the sovereignty. And it is especially because, when united together for their peculiar purposes, women lose even that second-hand sovereignty they are alleged to have—it is because of this, that they must have a first-hand sovereignty, a genuine guarantee that their wills shall be of consequence to the community they serve. Such certified consideration from the powers of law is both a symbol and a force indispensable to any group or person that either desires or is compelled by fortune to enter the competitive world.

Such is the argument from the ideal of democracy—theoretic, practical, and coercive in the concrete present. Yet,

in so far as we are believers in the progressive enrichment of life, we have something more to do than live up to our ideals. We have to illumine and improve them continually. The Athenian youths had a running-match in which they carried torches, and it was no victory to cross the tape with your torch gone out. Such is the race that is set before us. And we may well remember—we in America who scorn the contemplative life—that no amount of strenuousness with the legs will keep a flame burning while you run. You will have to take thought.

And it is out of a thoughtful endeavor, not merely to live up to an ideal of ours, but to develop it greatly, that the suffrage movement derives its chief force. I mean our ideal of woman and motherhood. It is not expected by the best advocates of this change that women will reform politics or purge society of evil, but it is expected, with reasoned and already proved certainty, that political knowledge and experience will develop women. Political responsibility, the character it demands and the recognition it receives, will alter the nature and function of women in society to the benefit of themselves, and their husbands, and their children, and their homes. Upon that ground they declare that it is of vital importance to the advance of civilized life, not only to give the ballot to those women who want it, but to rouse those women who do not yet know enough to want it, to a better appreciation of the great age in which they live.

The Industrial Era—for all the ill we say of it, we must say this great good, that it has made possible and inevitable the physical, and social, and moral, and intellectual liberation of women. The simplification of home life through invention and manufacture, the growth of large cities with their popular education, and above all the division of labor, have given her a free place in the active world. This fact is the distinctive feature of these ages. To a distant and universal historian—a historian who writes the lives of the people—that change in the position of women will appear, not only the most striking, but the most excellent achievement of ours. For we will never evolve a heroic race of people on the earth until we give them a twofold inheritance and tradition of active, intelligent virtue. That we have begun to do. And no act at the present time can more urge and certify this great step in the history of life than to give it a political expression and guarantee. Citizenship

will rouse and educate women, it will develop our ideal of them; therefore, it is a dominant necessity of advancing civilization that they have it.*

The relegating of women to a life of futile or neurotic sainthood, with exclusive charge of the goodness of the community and nothing to do with the community's behavior, has been a great foolishness at the bottom of our social habits. Of this ancient practice and the quite recent idealization of it, of the damage it has done to men and women and children, no history can give the account. Nor is it easy to establish a sense of it in an age which is permeated by the sentiments of a degenerate feudalism. It may awake the sane and the heroic in us, however, to recall the pagan ideal of Plato. He says, in the seventh book of the laws:

"The legislator ought to be whole and perfect, and not half a man only. He ought not to let the female sex live softly and waste money and have no order of life, while he takes the utmost care of the male sex, and leaves half of life only blessed with happiness when he might have made the whole state happy."

Two truths that will be news to many after two thousand years, are contained in that sentence. First, that it is just as important for women to be happy as for men; and, second, that true happiness for the best spirits of either sex, does not consist in living softly and wasting money and having no order of life, but in regulated purpose and achievement.

Compare that elevated utterance with the ideals of the age just behind us. Take a sentence from Martin Luther:

* I cannot refrain from saying a word here in apparent contradiction of my theme. It is addressed to those self-assured reformers who, with small sense for the real in history, find themselves in too fatuous agreement with that theme. There was scope for great character, and life's full experience, in the lot of woman long ago when many arts and industries and the business management of them, and of a household, fell to her. Spirited and splendidly intelligent women lived then. And they profited by opportunities for growth which are now gone. There are few places to be filled in the modern industrial world equal in variety and amplitude to the place of the "circumscribed" women of old. So that in gaining, through the development of industry, a great social freedom, women have lost in many cases a valuable breadth of experience. It is, however, lost irretrievably, and now we must replace it to what extent we can. We must replace that ample interest and stimulus to growth which women used to find in the home with interests beyond it, and chief among them—as being equally vital—the civic interest. Thus in so far as women are gaining freedom in this era, they demand citizenship as a guarantee of that freedom, and in so far as they are losing a certain breadth of life they require citizenship as a guarantee against narrowness.

"The woman's will, as God says, shall be subject to the man, and he shall be her master; that is, the woman shall not live according to her free will . . . and must neither begin nor complete anything without the man; where he is, there must she be, and bend before him as before her master, whom she shall fear, and to whom she shall be subject and obedient."

The same morbid tyranny appears, although without the offence of imputing it to God, in Jean Jacques Rousseau, a preacher of the native equality of men:

"The education of the women should be always relative to the men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young, to take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable: these are the duties of women at all times and what they should be taught in their infancy."

In these quotations the ideal woman, although drained of intelligence and power, appears to retain a monopoly of the distinctly Christian virtues, while the man permits himself upon Biblical or other authority the bearing of a despot. If you add to these ethics a certain idealization of that powerless woman, a tendency to erect her enforced feebleness into a holy thing, and add also a sentimental subservience of the man to this enslaved queen in matters of no moment, you have the attitude of the leisure class of our own day, our inheritance of elite sentiment. It is expressed by Lyman Abbott in his recent book about the womanly woman:

"When the wedding-day comes she has no desire to omit from the service the promise to obey. . . . She wishes not to submit a reluctant will to his, but to make his will her own. She wishes a sovereign and is glad to have found him. . . . To give up her home, abandon her name, merge her personality in his keeping—this is her glad ambition, and it swallows up all other ambitions."

In this more modern example it is still tyrannically demanded of the woman that she confine herself to the virtues of passivity, but the demand is made in morbid idealism rather than mere brutal bigotry.

It ought to be necessary only to point away from these unnatural dogmas to the great judgment of Plato; it ought to be necessary only to recall the high attitude of Jesus.* It wants no argument to support the development of women, for a developed personality is a good that justifies itself. The purpose of life is that it be greatly lived, and it can

* His superiority to His age, and especially to Saint Paul, in wisdom upon this point, is shown negatively in all His recorded dealings with women, so far as I remember, but particularly in that interview at the well with a woman, and a Samaritan, which so astonished His followers.

be greatly lived only by great characters. Yet it can be shown, upon a practical demand, for what special purposes we need women of great spirit.

We need them, first, for the cultivation of a certain gentle humility and good sense in their husbands. Under the system outlined by Luther, husbands do not achieve the greatest spiritual growth. They acquire, in average cases, a daily tone of contented self-assertion, to balance which they retain a soft area of sentimentality wherewith, at certain temperatures, they subject themselves and worship that very feebleness which other times they overbear. To idolize that which is held inferior in power and wisdom, because it excels in innocence of the actual world, is to commit the characteristic folly of decadence. Surely if man as a lover of women is to become an equable union of the tender and heroic, he will need to be both subdued and elevated by his love. He will not be brought to such perfection by the constant purveyal of privileges to a supposedly inferior being; nor will he be brought there by the discipline of a woman who wields her privilege with cunning or thunder, and under a system of "female subjection" rules the household. No, he will come into that perfection, if at all, in the company of a woman so developed as naturally to believe that she will be treated as an equal.

That this political reform will have deeper effects than its effect upon politics is proven by the outcries that oppose it: "You are bringing dissension into our homes! You are striking a blow at the family, which is the corner-stone of society!"—Hysterical outcries, I think, from persons whose families are already tottering. Certain it is that many of these corner-stones of society are tottering. And why are they tottering? Because there dwell in them triviality and vacuity. It is these that prepare the way of the devil! Who can think that intellectual divergence, disagreement upon a great public question, could disrupt a family worth holding together? On the contrary, nothing save a community of great interests, agreeing and disagreeing, can revive a fading romance. When we have made matrimony synonymous with a high and equal comradeship, we shall have done the one thing that we can do to rescue those families which are the tottering corner-stones of society. And that we cannot do until men and women are both grown up.

A greater service of the developed woman, however, will

be her service in motherhood. For we are in extreme need of mothers that have the wisdom of experience. To hear the sacred office of motherhood advanced as a reason why women should not become public-spirited and active and effective, you would think we had no greater hope for our race and nation than to rear in innocence a generation of grown-up babies. Keep your mothers in a state of invalid remoteness from genuine life, and who is to arm the young with wise virtue? Are their mothers only to suckle them, and then for their education pass them over to some one who knows life? For to educate a child is to lead him out into the world of his experience; it is not to propel him with ignorant admonitions from the door. A million lives wrecked at the off-go can bear witness to the failure of that method. I think that the best thing you could add to the mothers of posterity is a little of the rough sagacity and humor of public affairs.

Such are the great reasons for making the sexes equal in politics; such have been the reasons ever since the question was broached in the age of Pericles. It is not an issue to be answered by an appeal to chivalry, which is but a perfection of manners among the people of noble leisure; the need is deeper and more universal than that. Nor is it at its best a demand for justice upon the part of citizens unrecognized. Nor is it a plan to prevent corrupt practices in politics, or instil into the people's representatives any virtue other than the virtue of representing the whole people. That is the aim of those who advocate that we extend the suffrage to women. It is an act demanded by the ideal principle to the proof of which our government is devoted. It is, moreover, a heroic step that we can take with nature in the evolution of a symmetrical race.

MAX EASTMAN.